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Decision 'mine alone,' Reagan tells the nation

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President Reagan last night said the decision to ship arms to Iran was "mine and mine alone" and dismissed persistent rumors that Secretary of State George Shultz would resign over the episode.

Mr. Reagan, in his first nationally televised press conference in three months, also said the chance to free two U.S. hostages held in the Middle East was lost when reports surfaced of U.S.-Iranian contacts.

"I deeply believe in the correctness of my decision" to ship arms to Iran, Mr. Reagan said, acknowledging there was "considerable debate" within the administration over his secret plan to waive temporarily an arms embargo against Iran.

"I don't think a mistake was made," Mr. Reagan said. "It was a high-risk gamble that, as I've said, I believe the circumstances warranted. And I don't see that it has been a fiasco or great failure of any kind."

Mr. Reagan said U.S. contact with what he described as "moderate" factions in Iran began 18 months ago and was intended to rebuild relations with Tehran, help end the 6-year-old Iran-Iraq war and end Iranian support for terrorism.

U.S. arms were not exchanged for hostages, Mr. Reagan said.

"I don't see that the hostage-takers, the kidnappers, got anything," he said.

The president's 36-minute press conference was viewed by administration officials and lawmakers as an attempt to contain what has become one of the most serious foreign policy crises of his six-year presidency.

Sen. Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat slated to become chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said he counted "at least seven contradictions" between Mr. Reagan's remarks and what members of Congress were told at White House briefings.

"The problem has gotten worse. We have a foreign policy that is in serious disarray," Mr. Nunn said on NBC television. "It's time to look at the substance and procedure" of how foreign policy decisions are made by the White House.

Henry Kissinger, secretary of state in the Nixon and Ford administrations, called the decision to ship arms to Iran "a great mistake."

"Sending shipments to help moderates [in Iran] I find incomprehensible," Mr. Kis-

singer said.

And Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, criticized the president's decision not to inform Congress of his intention to waive the Iranian arms embargo.

"I suspect the president doesn't understand the law on informing Congress in regards to these things," the Indiana Republican said.

Mr. Reagan denied that Mr. Shultz had made any demands to remain as secretary of state.

"He has made it plain that he will stay as long as I want him, and I want him," the president said. "He knows that I want him to stay, and he has in advance said that he wants to. There have been no conditions."

But Mr. Reagan also said that he has ordered no further arms sales to Iran — a decision that Mr. Shultz wanted, according to administration sources.

He also said an explanation of the U.S.-Iranian contacts will be made to the appropriate committees in Congress. Some details will not be made public for reasons of national security and to protect the safety of U.S. hostages, he said.

Mr. Reagan said the U.S. contacts were with Iranian moderates, most of whom were not government officials. The arms shipments were intended to demonstrate to those factions that they were in fact dealing with the highest levels of the U.S. government.

Initial reports of the U.S.-Iranian contacts, which are believed to have been led by former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, said the U.S. group was met with normal protocol, indicating ties to the Tehran regime.

Mr. Reagan insisted that his credibility had not been damaged by the secret arms shipments, which took place while the administration was urging its allies to avoid selling arms to Tehran.

"I was convinced then, and I am convinced now, that while the risks were great, so too were the potential rewards," he said. "Bringing Iran back into the community of respon-

sible nations, ending its participation in political terror, bringing an end to that terrible war and bringing our hostages home are the causes that justify taking risks."

Mr. Reagan rejected a suggestion that the situation called for a shake-up in the National Security Council, which, with the CIA, carried out the secret initiatives.

"The State Department and secretary of state was involved, the director of the CIA were involved in what we were doing," Mr. Reagan said, rejecting contentions that the NSC had let the operation get out of hand.

Mr. Reagan also denied that any third country was involved in U.S. arms shipments to Iran, contradicting an earlier statement by White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan that the United States condoned an Israeli shipment of U.S. arms in September 1985, shortly before the release in Beirut of the Rev. Benjamin Weir, an American hostage.

But in an unusual written clarification issued after the press conference, Mr. Reagan said, "There may be some misunderstanding of one of my answers tonight."

"There was a third country involved in our secret project with Iran," he said, without naming the country, believed to be Israel.

"But taking this into account," the president stated, "all of the shipments of the token amounts of defensive arms and parts that I have authorized or condoned, taken in total, could be placed aboard a single cargo aircraft."

"This includes all shipments by the United States or any third country. Any other shipments by third countries were not authorized by the U.S. government," he said in the written statement.

The timing of the Israeli shipment is important because Mr. Reagan did not secretly approve a waiver of a U.S. arms embargo on Iran until Jan. 17, 1986.

The president spent nearly the entire press conference fielding questions on the highly volatile issue of arms shipments to Iran, with only three reporters raising other issues.

In response to those other issues, the president said.

- He expects to meet again with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev before his presidency ends and is "optimistic" about the prospects for reaching an arms control agreement.

- He would "look into" the need for a federal program for homeless people, but said "we are still spending more than has ever been spent before trying to help the needy."

- He has not considered breaking diplomatic relations with the Marxist Sandinista government of Nicaragua because "it gives us a listening post" there